

## anything (want you to have it)

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## anything (want you to have it)

by [squigly](#)

### Summary

“You never know, man,” Sapnap says, sitting back in his seat when Dream finally parks his car. “If we’re talking about dudes—”

“We were never talking about dudes,” Dream says.

“Yeah we fuckin’ were,” Sapnap says. “The girl’s dad. George, or whatever his name was. Didn’t you say you liked looking at him?”

Dream and George's kids get into fights a lot. This means, of course, that they have to see a lot of each other.

### Notes

i am truly uploading this at the last minute lmfao i do not know why i went so insane and literally wrote 14k. im sorry i love slowburn

idk whats going on in this fic!!! but it was cute and fun to write!!! i'm still deciding which other days to do out of dnf week so keep ur eyes peeled!!! <3

title is from valerie by bladee oops

thank u so much for reading :D i hope u enjoy!

Dream's just about passed out on the couch when he gets the phone call from Elliot's school, his cell filling the apartment with its high-pitched shrieking. "Hello," he says, voice throaty and rough when he answers, sitting up and rubbing his eyes with his fists.

"Hi, is this Elliot's father?" The woman on the other line says cautiously, which has never been a good sign in the past. Dream sits up faster, looking down at his wrinkled clothes.

"Um, yes, this is... he," Dream says, but tries not to beat himself up for it too much because he still feels kind of nauseous for being shocked awake. He'd had to stay behind at the office to clean-up some malfunction with an HR database, which meant he couldn't drift off into a nap at his desk like he usually does. He was so tired he hadn't even noticed Elliot didn't make it home. Shit. "Did something happen?"

"Um, your son was actually caught fighting with a fellow student in school today," the woman says. Dream shuts his eyes and shoves his face into his hands. The unsaid *again* hangs in the air.

Elliot's not a bad kid. He's never *been* a bad kid. He's just a bit of a latchkey—and Dream doesn't think it's fair to blame a kid who's a bit of a latchkey for fighting. It's what they do. He'd like to tell the secretary on the other line that kids can be mean, but they'll always get over it and probably end up best-fucking-friends with the other kid they beat up, but he obviously can't say that. He opens his eyes and shifts the phone back against his ear.

"It's the first day back, Lauren," he says.

"I know," she says, and nothing else. Like that's supposed to be enough solace for him to live with himself.

"I'll be there in fifteen," Dream says glumly, and hangs up, feeling around the couch cushions aimlessly for his keys. He locks the apartment shut behind him and makes his way down the rattling stairs of his building, squeezing himself through the parking lot to his shitty Toyota in record time.

And then he's in traffic and then he's at the school, waiting outside of the principal's office in an uncomfortably tiny plastic kid's chair, with a visitor's pass clipped to his lapel and the sound of the clicking tiles of the hallway reverberating in his ears.

He feels, oddly, like he's going in to get scolded. He knows he isn't—he knows Principal Callahan has thought about it before, definitely, what with those looks he always sends in Dream's direction when his vice principal is reading off Elliot's (admittedly impressive) list of offenses. But they've never said anything to him. They just force-feed them both resources and learning rooms and therapy sessions until something sticks, and nothing's ever stuck quite yet.

Around him, janitors mop at the tiles quietly and teachers retreat back to their classrooms, eyes tired and backs always turned to him. Maya definitely wouldn't have liked the fact that he'd signed Elliot up for some perpetually-exhausted public school in the city, but she didn't have much of a say in the matter anymore. He melts down the front of the seat, ignoring the itch to look down at his phone again.

He can see the vice principal peeking through the window again as she waits to see whether the second parent's arrived yet, but Dream doesn't see any sign of them. It's definitely strange—usually, if Elliot's caught fighting, they bring them both in to talk in quiet voices about an anonymous student now missing a lunchbox and some crayons. He doesn't know why they'd need the other parent for once, unless it's someone who isn't familiar with the type of person his son is. Not a lot of people are.

The doors at the end of the hallway open up, quite suddenly, and he catches sight of a man in frenzied clothes hurrying down with his phone against his ear, looking around the rooms frantically. He finally catches sight of the principal's office and comes to a standing halt, leaning against the wall next to the row of seats as Dream watches him.

He looks young. Way too young to be a parent. And that's not saying Dream's old himself or anything, but he's usually the exception—the odd-one-out at parent-teacher conferences, never invited to parent cookouts, doesn't volunteer to put up Halloween decorations in the classrooms, that type of thing. But this guy looks young, too.

"I'm not telling you what to *do*, I'm just telling you what the best decision would be," he says, suddenly, evidently trapped in some type of fast-paced conversation that Dream cringes away at. He definitely shouldn't be listening in, but it's hard *not* to. The hallway's fucking quiet. "I just—you know what? Send them an apology email and tell them we need another day. I really can't risk having to re-implement the HTML document." Dream looks up at him. The man glances over at him then clutches his phone again. "Listen, I'm at my kid's school—I have to go. We'll talk later."

He hangs up. And then they're alone in the hallway, breaths quiet and synced up with the slight music emanating from the janitor's headphones. Slowly, the man turns and sinks into one of the seats next to Dream.

They still haven't been called in. Dream knows it's a first-day-of-school thing—they're chewing

out Elliot and the other kid for ruining their first day back, telling them that they won't put up with that type of behavior for the rest of the school year. Dream's just surprised Elliot would risk it the minute he stepped back into the school. He'd thought he'd gotten his message across the last time they talked about his fights.

The man's clicking away on his phone, eyebrows furrowed as he tilts his screen away from Dream as if it's something he wants to see. It's *not* something he wants to see, for the record—even though he can tell what the man's apparently having trouble with.

“Um,” Dream says, voice only slightly rusty. The man looks up at him. “If you're worried about having to re-implement your HTML document, you could always replace it with a data array list.” The man just keeps looking at him, so he slinks back against his seat and shoves his hands into his pockets. “If it makes sense in context, I mean.”

He fiddles with the skin at his nails for a minute longer, feeling the back of his neck heat up as the man looks at him again.

“A data array list?” He repeats, as Dream tries not to pay attention to his sharp mouth, the bright flash of his eyes. “Like, with a for-loop statement?”

“Um,” Dream says, feeling worse by the minute, “Sure. Depending on what you're doing. Could use a foreach loop. No off-by-one bugs if you use a foreach loop.”

“Huh,” the man says, tilting his head to the side in thought. He stretches out a leg, and Dream pulls his knee in so that their feet won't knock together. “I suppose you're right. Thank you.”

“Yeah, man, of course,” Dream says, and looks at the door again. Still no sign of their kids or any teachers. He doesn't know whether that's a good thing or not. “Are you—you're a parent, right?”

“Oh,” the man says. “I'm... yeah.” Dream can identify with the hesitation, a little bit—he doesn't really know if he's earned the title quite yet. Or if it's a title you're supposed to earn at all. “You are as well?”

“Yeah,” Dream says, nodding down at his shoes. When he looks back up, the man is looking at him, too, with his arms crossed and his mouth playing in a fine, upturned smile, and he can feel his skin flush when he leans his forearms against his knees, looking down at the floor again. Out of nowhere, he pushes out a hand.

“I’m Dream,” he says. The man only looks confused for a second before reaching out to shake it. “Or Clay. But Dream’s fine, really. Everyone calls me that.”

“Cool,” the man says slowly, dropping Dream’s hand. “I’m George. Everyone calls me that.”

Dream laughs, a little, and then they’re laughing at the same time, which usually means that they’re laughing together. He doesn’t like the feeling. He promptly shuts up. “I’m Elliot’s dad. You’re —?”

“Sylvie’s,” George says, tone explanatory. “But she’s not really my—”

The door knocks open, and Mr. Callahan looks out at them, spreading the door open with one arm. “Elliot and Sylvie’s?” He asks, and Dream nods up at him, standing up to shuffle into the room. George follows him inside.

Elliot’s sitting on a spinning chair next to a girl who looks a little bit older than him, and for one of the only times Dream has noticed so far, *he’s* the one covered in bruises—there’s a fine blue mark on his cheek deepening in color by the minute. Dream flies closer, knocking his chin up with his fingers to survey the bruise.

“Shit,” he murmurs, mostly to himself, catching the way the vice principal shivers and the girl next to him giggles but not doing anything about it. “Come on, El. What’d you get yourself into?”

“It wasn’t even me this time,” he says darkly, and darts his face away from Dream’s hands. The ice pack he’s holding to his nose goes flying into his lap. “*She* started it!”

“Now, Elliot—” Callahan says thinly, but the little girl—Sylvie—interrupts him with a sudden, “No, I *didn’t* !” And Elliot says, “Yeah, you did,” and then, as if knowing for how long little kids can go with that conversation, George says, “No, Sylvie, quiet—I’d like to hear the full story.”

“We got paired together to read a chapter about China but then she said it was taking too long *and* that I was reading too slow,” Elliot says loudly.

“Come on, buddy,” Dream says. “Lower your voice.”

“*No !*” Elliot exclaims. “She’s a... dick.”

“*Elliot*,” Dream chastises immediately, looking up at George in paranoia, but he looks—amused, if anything. Principal Callahan covers up his reaction with a cough. “We don’t talk about people like that, Elliot. Apologize to her.”

“No, no,” George says, and looks down at Sylvie. “She might have been being a dick. Were you being a dick, Sylvie?”

Sylvie huffs. She kicks her feet out against the desk in front of her; she’s wearing frilly white socks and black Mary Janes, but her uniform cardigan is unbuttoned carelessly. The underside of her nose is crusted over with blood. “I wasn’t being a dick.”

“I’d appreciate it if you could all stop saying that word,” Principal Callahan says tiredly, finally stepping out from the doorway to sit back in his seat. “Now, I’ve had a conversation with Sylvie and Elliot already, so hopefully, while your parents are in the room, you two, you’ll be able to have a mature, *smart* talk about what you did wrong. Can you both do that for me?”

Dream stops zoning out, albeit guiltily, to look back down at Elliot. He’s prodding at a bandaid he has wrapped around his finger, and Dream gives his leg a tiny nudge with his knee. He looks back up.

“Yeah,” he says, voice dejected. Dream knows he’s smiling but he doesn’t try to hide it. It’s still his kid, for God’s sake. His khaki shorts have little star patterns on them.

Callahan looks over at Sylvie. “What about you, young lady?”

“He’s not even my dad,” she says. The tiny lilt of her voice is quiet, but Dream can make out an accent—the same English accent that George has.

Dream looks over at George, then, just like everyone else in the room does, and he scoffs a little bit, his face going red as he twitches against their combined looks. “It’s—I’m her uncle,” he says, determinedly avoiding Dream’s eyes. “I became her legal guardian after her mum passed, so—yes, she’s right. I’m not her father, no.”

“Oh,” Callahan says, a moment later. “Well, that’s fine. Either way—it’s important that we talk about what happened so that we can move on and not have this problem again. We value communication highly at this school, so understanding our points of conflict is extremely important both here and for when you two grow up.” Elliot and Sylvie blink passively at him. “So, with that in mind—Elliot, can you go ahead and tell us what happened?” When he opens his mouth, Callahan cuts him off again. “ *Without* the profanity?”

Elliot slumps back into his seat, feet dangling as he pushes them against the wheels. “We had to read about the Great Wall of China, but then when it was *my* turn to read, she said I was reading too slow,” he says, voice clear and still very audibly annoyed. “Then I said *yeah but ‘least I’m not stupid* then she said *yeah you are stupid* so I kicked her in the leg then she kicked me back. Harder! Dad, she kicked me back *harder* .”

“Oh,” Dream says, Elliot’s voice forcing him to pay attention again. “El—”

“This isn’t fair,” Sylvie says. “Georgie, he called *me* stupid first. And you said I should defend myself when people are mean to me! He was being mean to me!”

“Yes, but—” George tries, but Elliot cuts him off, yelling, “You were being mean to me first!” And then Sylvie says, “No, I wasn’t!” And the conversation derails yet again, to the point where Callahan has to stand up and smack his hands on his desk, getting their attention.

“Listen, you two,” he says. “I do *not* want to encourage an environment in this school that cultivates bullying, fighting, and petty disagreements. I’m sending you both out into the hallway with Mrs. Moreno while I have this conversation with your parents. Am I making myself clear?”

Neither Sylvie nor Elliot say anything when the vice principal herds them out into the hallway, leaving both Dream and George standing awkwardly amidst the makeshift seating. Dream looks at him again. He doesn’t know why he can’t stop looking at him. There’s something eerily proportionate about his face. The lines are all clean and soft and sharp. Clearly delineated.

“I’m sorry, but I had a meeting with the school guidance counselor before I even enrolled Sylvie at this school,” George says. Dream pushes at the spinning chair with his foot. “We talked about her anger issues and the fact that she fought at her previous schools, but it’s something we’re working on. She’s been through—quite a lot.”

“I understand that, Mr. Davidson, but we have a no-tolerance policy for wrongdoing at this school,” Callahan says gently. George steps away from the desk, rubbing his unshaved chin with his hand. “Usually I’d have given them both a longer punishment, perhaps a suspension—”

“No,” George says. “No, I—no babysitter. Definitely not a good idea.”

Callahan looks over at Dream, and he shrugs helplessly.

“Not a good idea for me, either,” he says. “My mom’s in Florida. So. No babysitter.”

George laughs, a little, and it satisfies a very deep part of Dream’s psyche. He looks over at him again, studying the way he pulls the sleeves of his dress shirt to his elbows. He’s so careful it looks orderly—makes Dream regret leaving his house when he looks like he’s just rolled out of bed. He looks down at his mismatched socks contritely.

“Well, listen,” Callahan says, dropping his voice a little. “They’re young, they had a disagreement, they both have their issues with... lashing out. But I worry about what could happen if they’re ever in the same class and start to dig at each other. God forbid another student gets involved.”

“God forbid,” George repeats crisply. Dream’s eyes are stuck to him like a fly to sticky strands of insect paper. He’s the center of the room’s gravity.

“I’ll keep you both updated on what my decision is,” Callahan says, a moment later. “Thank you both for coming. Mr. Davidson, if you could just stay a moment longer...”

“Of course,” George says, and Dream sends him a flimsy smile over the shoulder when he ducks out of the room that he immediately regrets. He knows he has some twisted cycle of thinking that admires the person George is. Young, like him, with a similar job and raising his niece—who seems a lot more similar to Dream’s kid than either of them realize.

When he’s back in the hallway, he looks down to catch sight of Sylvie sitting closest to him on the row of chairs, blinking up at him owlishly. Her eyes are the same color as George’s. He passes by her awkwardly and ducks down to look at Elliot.

He knows, logically, that he should be giving her distasteful looks—but Elliot’s been on the receiving end of those looks too many times to his liking, and he knows what it’s like to be a kid who punches a lot because they don’t know what else to do with their hands. Sapnap’s called him overly sympathetic before, but he doesn’t think you can ever have enough sympathy for a kid. They’re *kids*. “You okay, man?”



"I'm okay," Elliot says. He pushes his cheek out so that Dream can better see the bruise on his face. "See it? D'you see it, dad? Do I look like Aquaman?"

"Yeah, you look just like Aquaman," Dream says, amused, before realizing he probably shouldn't encourage that type of behavior. Definitely on him. "But Aquaman doesn't go around and punch people who don't deserve it. He uses his words first."

"I did *too* use my words," Elliot whines. "I called her stupid first!"

"No," Dream says. "First, you're supposed to ignore her. Pretend she didn't say whatever she said." He looks over at Sylvie again, but she's playing with her hands and his voice is hopefully too low for her to catch. "And then if she says it again, you walk right up to the teacher and tell her." Elliot frowns at him. "Can you do that?"

"Why do I have to tell the teacher?" He asks.

"Because you're a second grader and she's an old lady," Dream says. "She'll know what to do better than you will. And she won't *hit* Sylvie. Because that's not good, Elliot. We shouldn't be hitting people."

"I don't wanna *tell* on her," Elliot says. "People who tell on people are annoying."

"He's kind of got a point," Dream hears, from behind him. George is standing against the white wall with his hands in his pockets, and Dream stands up from his crouch, sitting on the seat next to Elliot as George ducks down to take his place.

"But sometimes it's good to be annoying," George continues, tilting his head when Elliot pushes his chin over his knees and tries to avoid eye contact. "And it's important to tell an adult when you feel sad or angry. Did Sylvie make you angry?"

Elliot doesn't say anything, still clutching his legs tightly. Dream reaches an arm over and touches his shoulder.

"Elliot," he says, chastising. "Answer his question." Elliot shakes his head.

George pouts out his bottom lip. “Did she make you sad?”

And, microscopically, Elliot nods his head. “She said I was stupid.”

“You’re not,” George says. “I bet you’re quite smart, Elliot. You said you like Aquaman? Do you like the comics or the movies?”

“Comics,” Elliot says. “The movies are too scary.”

George nods encouragingly. “Don’t I know it. Well, there you go—not many people are smart enough to be able to read all of the Aquaman comics, don’t you think?” Elliot shrugs his shoulders. “I bet they aren’t. And, listen—Sylvie says a lot of things she doesn’t mean. Matter of fact—Syl! Come here, love.”

She hops up from the opposing end of the seats and walks toward them, still awkwardly wiping her nose with the back of her hand only to dye her skin pink. She walks over to George, letting him grab hold of her arm.

“Do you want to apologize to Elliot?” He asks. “Properly?”

She huffs. Rolls her eyes. Fidgets her leg. “I’m sorry,” she tells him, and Elliot’s face flushes with color as he turns deeper into Dream’s side, still with his legs clutched against his body.

“It’s okay,” he says jerkily. “Sorry I punched you.”

“Sorry I punched you,” she parrots, and then looks over at George. “Can we go home now?”

And, for a second, Dream thinks George looks over at him. He can’t tell if he does because by the time he looks back over George is helping her button her cardigan back up. “We can go as long as you don’t punch anyone else on the way,” he says, and stands up to his full height, jutting out a hand so she can take it. His eyes meet Dream’s.

“Bye,” he says, kind of—shyly. “It was nice to meet you.”

“It was nice to meet you too,” Dream says, even when his voice catches, and then George leads her down the hallway until Dream finally loses sight of them when they exit from the main entrance.

He stands up, feeling weirdly shaky on his legs. “Let’s go, El,” he says, and Elliot hops down from his seat, running a few feet in front of him before realizing that Dream isn’t chasing behind him. He’s still a little lost in thought. And also still thinking about his kid beating the shit out of someone. Whatever.

“Who was that guy?” Elliot asks. “Was that Sylvie’s dad? He was nice. Sylvie’s not nice like him.”

“I’m sure she is,” Dream says. “You just don’t know her yet.”

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“In the least weird way possible, this kind of sounds like you’re crushing on some kid’s dad that you met once,” Sapnap says, from the shotgun seat.

Dream scoffs, eyes scrolling over the rows of parked cars in front of the elementary school. Their white headlights make even lines throughout the thickening fog, and the closer he inches to the sidewalk the heavier the rain patters against his windshield wipers. His dusty little Toyota’s really pushing overtime. “Still not gay, Sapnap.”

“I didn’t say you were gay,” Sapnap says. “You could be the other one. You could be bisexual. The one where you’d date anyone.” He seems to notice how focused Dream is on finding a clear parking spot where people aren’t honking at him every two seconds. “Come on. You’d have double the fuckin’ game. You could totally be bi.”

“Not listening,” Dream sing-songs, and finally, *finally*, manages to find a gap across from the empty fire hydrant space that he makes a beeline for before the stay-at-home moms picking up their kids beat him to it. He puts his hand on the back of Sapnap’s seat, twisting his neck so he can make it into the space. “And—besides—you’re still not gonna find someone who likes me enough that they’re chill with the fact that I have a kid.”

“You never know, man,” Sapnap says, sitting back in his seat when Dream finally parks his car.

“If we’re talking about dudes—”

“We were never talking about dudes,” Dream says.

“Yeah we fuckin’ were,” Sapnap says. “The girl’s dad. George, or whatever his name was. Didn’t you say you liked looking at him?”

“Well,” Dream says, feeling his face flush. “Yeah.”

“I don’t know about you, but I don’t look at men for fun,” Sapnap says.

“It wasn’t for— *fun*,” Dream says, frustrated. “He just seemed—I don’t know. Like, he seemed to just get it, you know? The principal said this stupid thing about other students getting involved in one of Elliot or Sylvie’s fights, and he just had this look on his face, like, *yeah, okay*. I think he could just tell that that school really doesn’t know what to do with its kids. If that makes sense.”

Sapnap frowns again and leans his head against the window. His hair smears the condensation already fogging up the windows thanks to the heavy rain. “They’re trying their best, dude.”

“No,” Dream says. “I know. But—you know Elliot’s never going to be their top priority, you know? It’s kind of scary.” Both he and Sapnap stiffen up, which always happens whenever Dream starts an in-depth discussion about fatherhood, a concept that continues to terrify and paralyze them both. Mostly Sapnap. Especially Sapnap. “Okay. Whatever. Point is—he was just cool. I don’t know. I liked him.”

“Like in a *want to be him* way or a *want to fuck him* way?” Sapnap asks, and Dream rolls his eyes and doesn’t even indulge Sapnap with a response. He knocks open his car door against the roaring rain, hiking up his hood as he jogs across the busy street to the school. He scans the brick flooring that marks the outside of the entrance, but still finds no sign of Elliot. He pushes past the main doors, already knowing which classroom to aim for.

He’s had to make a few early-evening runs to pick up Elliot before, and every time, he’s found him either with colored pencils up his nose or telling some impressionable little boy a story about how his fish grew wings. Dream doesn’t know where he finds the energy to be so lively at four p.m. He looks around the classroom, and of course, in the corner—next to a stack of paperbacks—George is standing hunched over his daughter’s desk, watching her explain her colored-in sheet of paper.

Dream's heart immediately thumps against his throat, and he pulls his hood back down, looking down at the mud he tracks into the room self-consciously. A few of the other parents picking up their kids from the rain give him tiny waves, or at least little looks in his direction, but George hadn't even seemed to notice him. He tamps down his disappointment and walks over to where Elliot is rolling his crayons off of the table and then picking them back up.

"You ready to go, honey?" He asks, and Elliot looks up at him, crushing one of the crayons flat against the table. "Is that a no?"

"I tried not to fight with anyone today," Elliot says matter-of-factly, voice defeated as though it's something that took all of his time and effort. "It was really hard."

Dream laughs, and when he looks up from Elliot's desk again he sees George looking up at him, wearing an undone tie around his neck and ducked down with his head close to Sylvie's. He raises a hand for a second—cautious, as if he isn't sure if Dream is watching—and then waves. Dream doesn't really feel himself start smiling, but he knows he does. He waves back.

Elliot turns around in his seat. "Who are you freaking *waving at*?"

George walks closer. Dream hisses air between his teeth, ducking down so he's eye-level with Elliot, saying, "So what did you say you did today?" And Elliot says, "I said I didn't *fight anyone*, duh," and by that point George has already made his way over, clutching Sylvie's hand tightly as he drags her behind him.

"Hey," he says. "Um—Dream, right?"

"Yeah," Dream says, standing up—and only then does it hit him that he towers. George has to squint up at him against the fluorescent light on the ceiling. "George. Hey. How're you?"

"Good, good," he says. "Just—didn't expect the rain, and I couldn't have her walking home in it, so—ended up leaving work early."

"What do you do?" Dream asks.

"I work at a startup," George says. "Actually ended up moving here because I got offered a better position than what I had in England, and... I mean, there were other things, of course." He

squeezes Sylvie's hand. "Fresh start and all that."

"Fresh start," Dream repeats, the words feeling warm in his mouth. He'd always liked that idea. Eternal renewal. Not exactly something he can have, at this point, but nice nonetheless. "Cool."

"Where do you work?" George asks.

"I'm just—I.T. for a bank," Dream says, kind of lamely. "I know it's kind of boring."

"No," George says. "It's not. You're smart. I bet you're good at it."

Dream scoffs. "If I was smart I'd have made it to a startup already."

"Bullshit," George says, surprising them both. "It's really just a job. Nothing that special. And plus—you helped me solve a problem we'd been having for the entire day the other week. When we went in for these two." He gives Sylvie a little shake with his hand. "So... yeah. I owe you."

"You owe me?" Dream asks. "How're you gonna repay me?"

George shrugs. "I'll figure it out if you give me your number."

"Ew," Sylvie says. George ignores her, rocking on the balls of his heels as he keeps looking at Dream, as if daring him to say something to politely turn him down. He doesn't think he could say *anything* at the moment, especially not a refusal.

But he knows he has to. Maybe not a refusal—but he has to say something. *I will, but I'm just letting you know I'm straight*. It should be easy to say because it's true, but when he opens his mouth it feels like something invisible is taking up too much space inside it. And then he nods.

"Okay," Dream says, finally. They're surrounded by screaming children and gossiping moms and a grey-white tinge of heavy rain and he's giving George his number. "Give me your phone."

George gives him his phone, and he types in his name and his number and spends a good few

seconds debating on adding an emoji before deciding that he is twenty-three years old and capable of *not* adding an emoji, so he pushes the phone away and hands it back to George again, silently distraught that he'd even thought about adding an emoji. He needs to take a nap.

"I'll be awaiting that repayment text," Dream says, finally. George beams at him, slipping his phone into his back pocket.

"I'll need, like, three to five business days to brainstorm," George says.

"Naturally," Dream says, and George smiles at him over his shoulder again before leading Sylvie out of the classroom, her oversized backpack bobbing against her pink cardigan. Dream turns around quickly, looking down at Elliot.

"Are you friends with Sylvie's dad?" He asks, confused. "You shouldn't be friends with Sylvie's dad. He's *Sylvie's dad*."

"I thought you said you liked Sylvie's dad, Elliot," Dream says lightly, only half-paying attention. He gets him out of his seat and makes sure the crayons are back in their box, herding him back out into the hallway so they can continue back into the car where he'd forgotten Sapnap is waiting.

"Yeah, but if you're friends with Sylvie's dad that means I have to see Sylvie, like, all the time," Elliot says. "Just like I see Uncle Sap all the time."

"You like Uncle Sap, though," Dream points out.

"Yeah, but I don't like Sylvie," Elliot says.

"You won't have to see Sylvie, don't worry, man," Dream says. "Hood up. We're gonna have to run across the street."

Elliot giggles and tucks his hair back under his hood, letting Dream clutch his hand as they dart through the layer of rain still clattering from the sky.

Sapnap doesn't make it to Elliot's soccer game, something that Dream's definitely going to hold against him the next time he's being asked some kind of favor, like driving him home from a bar or buying him coffee the morning after he drives him home from a bar.

He does understand why—some excuse about his mom or whatever, Dream didn't want to hear it—but what he doesn't understand is why he couldn't make it for the *second* half of the game. It's a nice day. The sun's hot but it's still windy—New York autumn at full blast.

He also kind of needs to talk about George asking for his number and then never texting him, and he certainly can't talk about that to Elliot. It definitely feels odd—it's not like he's been waiting by his bedside table for a text and jumping at every notification noise, except he totally has. He needs Sapnap to tell him either the cold hard truth or to either snap out of it. He isn't sure which option he truly prefers.

He watches Elliot dart among the little kids on the field, but instead of pushing them to the ground, he stiffens his little face and plays even harder. There's definitely a lot less stress for Dream when he's playing soccer instead of getting into physical fights—so far, it's the only thing that seems to compare. He watches along, chest buzzing with pride until he feels the weight of the bench he's sitting on dip. George is sitting next to him.

“Woah,” Dream says, before realizing that he hasn't spoken in about an hour and he's been ignoring everyone else around him, most notably the referees and soccer parents. “Hi.”

“Hi,” George says, smiling faintly. “Fancy meeting you here. Is Elliot on the team?”

“Yeah,” Dream says, and points over to him. “Striker.” They watch him steal the ball from a little boy on the opposing team, smiling widely at the ground as though he's realized what a good pass he's made. “He's pretty good.”

“Ferocious,” George agrees, pushing his chin onto his fist.

Dream knows he's just going to continue staring at him if he doesn't say anything, so he says, “And, um, Sylvie? Is she—does she play on the team?”

“Oh, no,” George says. “She and a few of the kids from her class worked on the banners. Figured I'd come by and take some pictures for her. She's home sick.”



“Shit,” Dream says. “Is she okay?”

George shrugs. “Yeah, no worries. Just a cold.” He looks over at Dream again, and moves a leg over to nudge their knees together. “Why’re you sitting so far away from everyone like this?”

“Huh?” Dream says, and looks behind him. He recognizes a few of the parents sitting behind him: he sees them pretty often at soccer games, and a few of them will send him smiles when he goes to pick up Elliot from the school or something, but he’s never really talked to them. He doesn’t know what it would be like if he just started sitting next to them. “Oh. I mean—I don’t know. I don’t really know them that well.”

“They’re nice,” George says. “Kind of weird about the... dad thing, but nice.”

Dream snorts. “More than weird about it for me.”

“What do you mean?” George asks.

Dream doesn’t know what he means. It’s just a feeling. The side-glances and the whispered words and the way they always seem to know what days he’s working and what days he’s not, just so they can schedule PTA meetings or playdates or birthday celebrations without him. Without Elliot. But that’s not exactly something he can drop on George like a bomb. “I mean... you’ve seen what El’s like. Some parents really try their hardest to avoid him. And me.”

George is quiet, a second later. “You know one of those mums up there asked me why I moved if Sylvie was just gonna stay the same in America?”

“What the fuck?” Dream asks. “Really?”

George looks down at the floor. “They’re all so, so fucking clueless, but—if they try—they can be nice.” He looks over at Dream again. “Maybe they just stopped trying. With you.”

Dream scoffs, still looking out at the field. “I don’t know what about me made it so easy to stop trying to be nice.”

“How old are you?” George asks.

“Twenty-three,” Dream mumbles, and watches a pinprick of blood burst from the corner of his thumb where he’s been picking obsessively at the skin.

“That’s why,” George says. “Stop doing that.” He moves his hand towards Dream’s, snatching his fingers away from his thumb, making Dream look up at him in surprise. “You’re twenty-three and you have a job and an apartment and a kid. They’re all jealous of you.”

Dream laughs dryly, letting George keep all of his fingers tucked to the side with the side of his palm. “I don’t think they need to be jealous when they also have jobs and apartments and kids.”

“No, but—what age did you have Elliot? Sixteen?” George asks. Dream nods. “Come *on*, Dream. You had a kid at sixteen and even though he has his problems and he acts out sometimes, he’s a good kid. And they can tell you love him. And they’re pissed off you’re not already burnt out and suffering like they are.” Dream turns his shoulder, looking back over at the group of parents that are now passing around an uncovered bottle of booze. George knocks their shoulders together. “Don’t even think about them, okay?”

“Okay,” Dream says, a moment later, and when George drops his hand, the world splits evenly in two. George is wearing a winter jacket and a beanie hiding his hair, but his nose is bright red as he shoves his side into Dream’s.

“It’s so cold,” he says, and for a second Dream thinks he’s going to do something like lean his head onto his shoulder, but he doesn’t.

He really, *really* needs to talk to Sapnap.

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George texts him the next day. Something stupid like, *that soccer game ended up being a lot more fun than i expected lol*, something that immediately makes Dream shriek and flip his phone face-down on the kitchen counter, pausing, suddenly, in his frantic salad-making. He debates texting back for a while, reverting back into his lovestruck teenager self for a good twenty minutes before finally deciding to swallow his pride and respond *haha yeah you should come to more with me!*

*i'd love to* , George texts back, and from there Dream realizes they're actively *texting* , sending each other tiny messages throughout the day and then having full-blown conversations at night, funny conversations and serious ones about, like, the responsibility of fatherhood or whatever. Conversations about the many Things That Make Dream Stiffen Up topics. It's kind of easier over text.

He doesn't tell Sapnap. He's going to, but he doesn't want the harsh reality that Sapnap always suggests—the eventual, *okay, man, but where exactly is this going? Because you said you weren't attracted to men and it looks like you're attracted to him.*

Dream doesn't know if *attracted* is the right word. He hasn't dated for a while. He hasn't dated since Maya, mainly because he ended up getting her pregnant and then she ended up leaving, which he supposes is the totally natural reaction towards giving birth to a child.

He doesn't regret it. He'd do it again and again and again if it meant he could have Elliot exactly the way he is. But it does leave a mark, because every time Sapnap's tried to set him up with a girl he can't help but get panicky over the kid thing, and also the *I-might-get-you-pregnant-again-and-have-two-kids-at-twenty-three* thing.

And—contrary to popular belief—Dream's never been into dudes. He knows that a lot of that comes from the fact that he doesn't want all of the parents at the school seeing him dating a guy, because he *knows* what they would say about Elliot and even though he knows it's not true he doesn't want to risk the conversation. The way other kids would treat him. He just hasn't let himself think about what that would be like for them both.

Because it's not just him, anymore. He can't just think about how things affect *him* . It's one of the rare days where he's home in the middle of the day because of some scheduling error when George calls him for the first time.

He panics, for a second, deciding what kind of voice to use when he answers the phone. He doesn't want to sound too eager, but he knows sounding unexcited can't end well either.

"Hi," George says. Fuck. He was too slow.

"Hey," Dream says, silently cursing how low his voice sounds. He sounds like he's just woken *up*, for God's sake. He is usually in a perpetual state of just waking up, but he doesn't want to sound like it. "Um, what's up?"

“Nothing,” George says. “Just figured I’d call to see if you finished that bug report you told me you still had to do.”

“Sounds like an excuse to call me,” Dream says.

“Yeah, it was,” George says, and only then does Dream realize that he’s flirting back. Because Dream had been *flirting*. He’s not supposed to be flirting with people who he isn’t interested in. That’s never gone well. “No, I’m just—I figured it was easier than texting while I’m supposed to be working. I’m not a multitasker.”

“You’re calling me at work?” Dream asks, exiting out of his bedroom to lean against the wall next to the door. “What if you get caught? Is this really how you want to go down?”

“You’re right,” George says, voice sounding like he’s smiling. “Guess I should hang up.” He doesn’t, of course. “Yeah, I’m at work. Really shouldn’t be, though. I left Sylvie home alone today and I’m already jumping out of my skin.”

“Shit,” Dream says. “She’s still sick?”

“Yeah,” George says, sighing. “Told her I would be out for most of the day and I have my friend Karl going over to check on her in the afternoon, but—still. I don’t know. I just feel shitty.”

Dream knows where he’s coming from. Every time he’s had to run out of the house at the last minute, he’s either had to beg Sapnap to babysit or find some babysitter with a seventy-five dollar rate to watch Elliot for the night. “Um, where do you guys live?” He asks.

“Tribeca,” George says. Surprisingly close.

“I mean, I’m on, like, the outskirts of SoHo,” Dream says, already deciding whether they’re at the level where he can start doing George favors. “I could, like, pop over really quickly and check up on her, if you want? I don’t have work today, and Elliot’s at school.”

George doesn’t say anything for a second, and Dream is half-expecting him to curse him out, but he doesn’t. “Really? You’d do that?”

“Of course, man. That’s what friends do,” Dream says, as a panicked afterthought. George doesn’t say anything for a minute longer, breathing slowly on the other end.

“Right,” he says. “Um, yeah—it is what friends do. Yeah. Sure. That’s really nice of you, but I don’t want you to feel like—”

“Oh, no, no, no, don’t worry,” Dream says. “I know you’d do it for me. I mean, me and you—we gotta look out for each other, right? I know it’s fucking hard doing it alone and everything. From, like, experience.”

“Yeah,” George says. “Okay. Yeah. Cool. I’ll, um—I’ll text you the address.”

He’s close enough that Dream could take the subway, but he opts for driving over there instead, parking in front of George’s apartment complex without blocking any fire hydrants. He pushes through the glass entrance, looking through the ringers for the one George had told him to buzz. Davidson—fourth floor. Sylvie answers the ring.

“Is this the stupid man who’s supposed to babysit me?” She says, sounding disgruntled.

“Um, yeah,” Dream says, not completely sure whether he’s the stupid man. “It’s the stupid man.”

She sighs heavily and then buzzes him inside, and he takes the stairs before traveling down the carpeted hallway to try and find their apartment building.

When he knocks, Sylvie opens the door, blinking up at him sleepily. “You look like Elliot,” she says, her voice hoarse with her stuffy nose. She’s wearing fleece pajamas and holding a stuffed penguin. She turns around and goes back to the living room, hopping on the couch.

Dream nods a little and closes the door behind him, awkwardly looking around the room. It’s a nice apartment—higher ceilings than his, but a lot smaller, with more pillows and carpeting and no smell of mildew and bleach in the hallway. Definitely a welcome change. He watches Sylvie shove her head against the pillow and push her penguin under her chin. She’s watching Judge Judy.

“So,” Dream says, toeing his shoes off by the door next to a group of boots and sneakers. “Are

you, um—are you feeling okay, Sylvie? George just asked me to come over and see how you were feeling. He said someone’s supposed to check up on you a little later.”

“Karl,” she says, voice bored. She curls up closer around her penguin as her eyes start to slowly lid shut.

“Okay,” Dream says, a moment later. “Karl.” He walks closer, sitting on the edge of the couch next to her. He’d have expected having a kid would prepare him for babysitting *other* people’s kids, but it never really gets easier. “What’re you watching?”

“Judge Judy,” she says.

“Who’s she judging?” Dream asks, jokingly, and she cuts her eyes at him and doesn’t respond. He sighs, leaning back into the cushions. “Okay. Message received.”

They watch the show together for a while. Judge Judy is deciding who in the divorced couple should get custody of the dog they adopted together. The couple take every opportunity to bitch and fight with each other, but Sylvie never seems to react at the bleeped-out swearing—she just watches, eyes tired and sniffing every few minutes.

“You don’t wanna watch anything else?” Dream asks her, eventually. “Judge Judy’s kinda boring, don’t you think?”

“I’m thinking,” she says.

“Thinking?” Dream asks.

“Sometimes I make up stories in my head,” she says. “I tell them to Georgie sometimes but he’s not here. Only he likes listening to them.” She ducks her head again, fingers stroking against her penguin. Dream’s heart hurts.

“I mean, you could always tell me,” Dream says. “I like listening to stories.” He doesn’t know why it expects it to work; Sylvie remains quiet. “Hey, when did you and your uncle move here, Sylvie?”

“When my mum died,” she says, matter-of-fact. “Georgie was sad. He still gets really sad sometimes. I get sad too, but then I just stop.”

“That’s good,” Dream says quietly. He couldn’t imagine her fighting. Or, rather: he can’t imagine her fighting when she’s like *this*, small and quiet and making up stories in her head. But kids have a lot of shit going on, sometimes, and it’s even worse for them because they’re so tiny and there’s less space to keep it all in. “You said he—gets sad, sometimes?”

“Uh huh,” she says. “I know ‘cause that’s when Karl comes over and they talk for a long time on the balcony. And then he leaves and they feel better. He used to be here a lot. Now, not anymore.”

“Huh,” Dream says. “That’s—that’s good.” He looks at Sylvie again. “Do you still get sad sometimes?”

“No,” she mumbles. “Just mad.”

“Me too,” Dream says.

They watch Judge Judy for a while, and then Sylvie tells him she’s hungry, so Dream has to go picking through their kitchen cabinets for something he can make her. He’s more of a takeout guy, but he doesn’t know how George would feel about him feeding his daughter junk.

That’s how George finds them three hours later—Dream’s slaving in front of his stove, frying french toast as Sylvie tries to give him directions of what she vaguely remembers from helping George cook. The bread Dream is soaking against his skillet is definitely not french toast, but at least it’ll be edible. He looks up at the door when George slides inside.

“Hi,” he says breathlessly.

“Hey,” George says, smiling widely, his voice breaking in amusement. “What are you two doing? Darling, are you really making Dream make you french toast? That’s not how we treat our guests.”

“He said he’d make me whatever I wanted,” Sylvie says, feet kicking from the countertop. George laughs, a little, pulling off his jacket to hang over the edge of the couch. He walks over to stand next to Dream, who’s very carefully pushing a spatula against his french toast.

“You really shouldn’t make her those types of promises,” George teases, his voice closer to Dream’s ear than expected. When he looks up, George is in his space, his palm closing over the back of Dream’s hand. “Look, you’re not supposed to be *scared* of the toast. Really push down. Like—” He shoves the spatula closer against the toast, the tips of his fingers cold against Dream’s skin.

Dream laughs, and when George pulls his hand away, he flips over the toast, pushing down again. “Like this?” He asks. “Is the technique to your liking?”

“Just to my liking, actually,” George says back. He steps away, and the moment melts as he wraps his arm around Sylvie’s side, kissing her forehead quickly before feeling it with the back of his hand.

“You feeling better, poppet?” He asks.

“Not really,” she says. “I probably have to stay home tomorrow too.”

“Yeah, no,” George says. “I don’t think so. You’ve missed enough this week.” Sylvie huffs, kicking her legs back so she sits against the counter. He turns back to Dream, leaning against the counter with the back of his arms to mirror her.

“You’re home pretty early,” Dream says. “I really didn’t mind staying with her for a little longer, if you were busy—”

“Oh, no, it’s not that,” George says. “She just—I don’t know. I worry every time I leave her alone, no matter if it’s with a babysitter or with Karl or with you—just still have these nerves about it.” He looks at Sylvie again, and raises his arms. “You wanna go back into your room, Sylvie?”

“Kay-kay,” she says, and hops into his arms so he can lower her back down to the floor. She grabs her penguin from the living room and vacates the room immediately, and George waits for her to leave before turning back around, dipping his voice to Dream.

“But I appreciate it,” he says, and he smells like flowers—something clean and pretty. Something safe. “But you really—I know Elliot gets home in a few hours. You can totally head home now if you’d like to.”



“I mean, it’s only eleven,” Dream says. He doesn’t know what he’s *doing*, giving up his off day for a guy he just met and his niece—who’s cute and very funny, yes, but is also the niece who got into a fight with his son. But people have probably met under worse circumstances. Probably. “And I’m not about to leave before I finish this french toast. I’m not that evil of a person.”

“I mean, if you can call that french toast, sure,” George giggles, stepping closer to him against the stove to turn the fire up a little higher. “Did you fully mix the eggs into the milk?”

“Duh, I fully mixed the eggs into the milk,” Dream says, but George moves over to grab something from a counter above their heads, his arm stretching against Dream’s chest, his hair tickling his chin. “You’re just—an elitist. I can never make you happy.”

“I’m not an elitist,” George says. “Drama queen. Don’t worry—we can drown out your mistakes with maple syrup.”

They eat their french toast with Sylvie and then watch some more Judge Judy and then it’s eventually time for Dream to leave, so he still has time to make Elliot something to eat before he actually comes home from school. It’s a nice day—one of the warmer ones this week. When he’s at the door getting ready to leave, Sylvie looks up at him.

“I don’t like Elliot, but you’re really nice,” she says. “And I like you. You’re pretty.”

Dream laughs, without thinking. “I—thank you, Sylvie. That’s really sweet.”

And then George is at the door, standing with his back pressed against the wood, his hands still clenched around the knob. “Thanks for coming over,” he says, quietly—as though Sylvie can hear them from the other end. Or maybe he just wants to lean in.

Dream doesn’t know why he’s thinking like that. He just hasn’t made a new friend in a long time—or, a friend he’d actually want to actively see on the daily, like Sapnap or any of the other people that stayed his friend after he had a kid. His head’s just been kind of messed up because he’s forgotten that the lines can be kind of blurry, when you haven’t dated or had a friend in a while.

“Didn’t think I’d ever be described as pretty,” Dream says.

He's probably going crazy, anyway. George isn't looking at him like that.

"I mean, she's right," George says. "You are. Hey, text me if you ever need someone to watch Elliot, all right?"

"What?" Dream asks.

"Sylvie has clubs after school on Mondays and Tuesdays, so you can call me if you ever need someone to watch him then," George says, blinking confusedly as if he doesn't understand what Dream is asking. He feels his face warm.

"I meant, like—the other thing," he says. "The—"

"Calling you pretty?" George says. "Sorry. I won't do it again if you don't want me to."

"No," Dream says. "It's not—that. It's..." and he keeps looking at George, and George keeps looking at him, and then he ducks his face and breathes in, a little, deciding whether what he wants to do is a good idea, because he doesn't even know where the thought is *coming* from, because it's just in his head, constantly bumping against the edges, and then George says, "It's what?" and Dream says, "It's nothing," and then kisses him.

George kisses back. Almost immediately. There's still that second where he doesn't seem to know what's going on, but then he seems to make his way back. His mouth is hot and his tongue feels warm against Dream's lips. When Dream seems to know to pull away, George is still kissing him. He takes a step back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Sorry," Dream says.

"No," George says. "Dream, it's—"

"No," Dream says. "It's—I shouldn't have done that. I—I didn't want to do that. I didn't mean to do that." His brain races away from him, and he shoves his hands into his pockets, twisting them against his sides. George stares at him, eyebrows knitted together, his mouth pink where Dream had kissed him. Because Dream had kissed him. Where the fuck did *that* come from? "Listen, George, I'm—I can't."

“You can’t what?” George asks. “You can’t kiss me?”

“Yeah,” Dream says, a second later. George bites his lip into his mouth, and he doesn’t look confused anymore—he looks a little pissed. Dream would be pissed, if he were him. He’d be pissed beyond belief. “Sorry. I don’t know whether—my brain’s all messed up. I don’t think about guys that way.”

“You don’t...” George says, voice trailing off. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Dream says, during the silence. “I’m sorry. Really.” George crosses his arms. “Hey, I’m gonna—I’m gonna go. But I’ll talk to you later, okay? I’m sorry. I hope this doesn’t ruin anything between us.”

“Yeah, I really hope not, dude,” George says.

Dream doesn’t really stop thinking when he walks out of his apartment, makes his way back into his car, sits in the driver’s seat with his wrists hanging from the steering wheel. He makes Elliot french toast when he gets home.

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“If we don’t go soon, I’m going to scream,” Elliot says.

Dream sighs, shoving his keys back into his pocket before emptying them of the gum wrappers he still has in his jeans. “Don’t scream, Elliot. Come on.”

“I’ll scream so loud I’ll break glass,” Elliot says. He’s perched against their open front door in his Velcro shoes and his star-patterned shorts. “Like when Emma Frost turns into diamond and then breaks into a bunch of little diamonds in X-Men. And like when Aquaman throws seashells at Black Manta.”

“You’re gonna throw seashells at me, El?” Dream asks, only slightly distracted.

“Not at *you*,” Elliot clarifies. “At someone else. Like Sylvie.”

“No throwing things at Sylvie, please,” Dream says, finally unearthing his phone from the couch cushions. He really wouldn’t prefer to spend a Friday night putting up Halloween decorations in Elliot’s classroom, but Sapnap told him he thought it would be a good idea—some stupid way of making him feel more secure when surrounded by other parents.

He’s only really going because George is going, being surrounded by parents notwithstanding. They’d talked beforehand and George had told him he was thinking about going, just so he could talk to a few of the other parents and find out whether their kids were friends with Sylvie, but he didn’t want to stick around too long. Dream had immediately translated that into going, even against his own will.

He and George are friends, he tries to tell himself. They had that kiss, which was confusing and painful and made things painfully uncomfortable for a good few days, but then George had asked him to go see a movie and he’d asked Sapnap to babysit and then they’d gone to an actual movie theater and gotten really drunk in a bar in the middle of the day, and it hadn’t been uncomfortable anymore. It had been George’s idea. He said it reminded him of home.

“The school is so weird at night,” Elliot says, when Dream pulls up to the front of the building to the sight of a few of his classmates skipping alongside their parents as they’re admitted through the doors.

“Tell me about it,” Dream says, and turns around to the sight of Elliot excitedly unbuckling his seatbelt. “El—look at me. When we go in there, you’re not gonna cause trouble and you’re gonna sit with your friends and color in some pictures of pumpkins, okay?” Elliot pouts at him. “I’m serious, man. No flinging glue around. No eating glitter.”

“It’s crunchy,” Elliot says. “Like popcorn.”

“No eating glitter,” Dream says firmly, and then gets out of the car to let him out.

He’s right—the school freaks Dream out, too, with its looming half-open doors and the shadowy chairs pushed into the hallways. They follow a gaggle of other parents into the cafeteria, which is lit up with orange lights and has a few teachers motioning where parents should sit. Dream already feels sick to his stomach.

He looks down, and Elliot isn't at his side, already having found a spot amidst his fellow soccer team members to sit precariously on top of a cafeteria table and dump glitter on top of a picture of a black cat. He doesn't seem to be eating it, which is good. Dream looks around, but George doesn't seem to be here.

He tries to hold in his sigh, and also tries to hold in the urge to text George and ask where he is. He resigns himself to sitting at an empty table and letting a third-grade teacher hand him tiny scissors and a glue stick. He has to cut spider-webs out of white construction paper. That, he can do.

He knows the stupid fucking PTA parents are looking at him. He tries not to look up at them, but only makes himself feel worse the more he holds up his white construction paper and cuts out triangles and long lines. He gets kind of lost in cutting up the paper until he feels someone sit across from him. George.

"Spider-web duty?" He asks, bottom lip pouted out, and Dream immediately feels better.

"Yeah," he says, with a tiny scoff. When he looks down at his thumb, he's almost stabbed himself with the edge of the kid scissors. He places them flat against the table, and when George reaches over to grab them he can feel the cold emanating from his skin. "I wasn't sure if you were gonna... um... make it."

"You kidding?" George asks, looking down at his white construction paper. "I wouldn't miss Halloween decoration time for anything."

"I'm glad to see where your priorities lie," Dream says. "I know you wouldn't rather be doing anything else at six p.m. on a Friday."

"We're joking, but you're right," George says. "Not like I had anything else planned. I was probably just gonna play video games." He snips the corner of the circle he cut out of the paper. "And order pizza so Sylvie will get off my ass."

Dream giggles. He looks behind George, catching sight of Sylvie helping a teacher hang up giant orange lanterns. "Not french toast again?"

George doesn't laugh. "Nah, not french toast."

There's a terrible second where Dream thinks he's said something wrong, but George seems to shake it off, moving his leg to nudge Dream's foot under the table. His hair sticks up over his ears, and his cheeks are pink from the wind outside. "What're you doing for Halloween?"

"Bringing Elliot trick-or-treating, probably," Dream says. "I asked him if he wanted to do matching costumes, and he said, quote, *gross* . So I'll probably just wear a cowboy hat or something."

"Sounds very entertaining," George says. "I'd say you both should come over and watch scary movies, but..."

"But," Dream says, smiling a little, and when he looks up again George is smiling back, brushing cut-up pieces of paper off of the table. Dream helps him, his brain willing their fingers to touch against his better judgement. "Whatever. It's cool. What're you guys doing?"

"Sylvie's not big on Halloween," George says. "So... yeah. Probably just movies. I'm going out with my friends the next day, though." There's a tense beat. "You should—do you want to come?"

"Sure," Dream says. "What're you doing?"

"Dunno," George says. "Probably just going out. But, um—they kind of—I mean, you don't know who they are or anything, but I've kind of... vaguely mentioned you to them."

"Have you?" Dream teases. "What did you say?"

George laughs, looking back down at his paper. "Probably shouldn't bring that up."

Oh. Of course. "Shit. Sorry."

"No," George says. "It was—on me. I misread. I didn't realize you weren't—"

"No, you didn't misread," Dream says, watching George click very harshly at his scissors when they get caught in the paper and stop cutting. "I mean— *I kissed you* . You definitely didn't misread."

George doesn't look back up at him. "I misread the part where you're into guys."

"Oh," Dream says. "Right." George keeps cutting in the silence, and he looks down at his shitty cobweb and uncaps his gluestick, re-connecting a slit in the paper he'd cut accidentally. Out of nowhere, George smacks his scissors on the table.

"It's kind of weird you'd do that, though," he says, evidently trying to keep his voice level, since they're surrounded by kids taping pictures of witches up against the walls of the cafeteria. "Like, I know we agreed we wouldn't talk about it, but kissing me when you don't like—"

"Shhh," Dream says, the paranoia heating the surface of his skin. George presses his lips into a thin line and looks down at his paper again.

"Fine," he says. "Okay. Here—um... *high-fiving* me when you don't like guys was kind of weird. I don't usually *high-five* people I'm not attracted to."

Dream's throat clogs up, and he tries to avoid eye contact, busying himself with running his nail through a groove in the table. "Okay, well, I wasn't thinking," he says. "What, have you never *high-fived* someone and regretted it?" The hurt that flashes over George's eyes is thick and immediate. "No! Not—I didn't regret it. It was an amazing high-five, George. It was the best high-five ever."

"You don't have to tell me that," George says. "If you actually regretted ki—high-fiving me, you don't have to lie. Just tell me so I can stop thinking about it."

"No," Dream says. "I—no. I'm just—it's always been hard for me, you know? Women my age obviously aren't going to want to— *high-five* someone with a kid, and dudes, I mean—" he punctuates his words with a shove forwards with the scissors. "You should hear the way people talk about Elliot, man. I don't need them saying he acts out because he doesn't have a mother figure in his life or something. Or that I'm not doing a good enough job on my own—I don't know. I just can't handle the things people say."

"You let that shit get to you?" George whispers, leaning in closer. His voice is the sharpest noise in the room, which is already covered in a hearty layer of shrieking kid clamor. "You really shouldn't let that shit get to you. You're doing a good job, Dream."

“Thank you,” Dream says, face heating. “You are, too.” George leans away, determined countenance flattening away from him. “No—you really are. I don’t know your entire situation, obviously, but you’re doing a really good job. Sylvie’s great.”

George smiles down at his lap. “You need to stop being nice to me if you don’t want to high-five me.”

“I won’t,” Dream says. “Or, I mean—I will. If we’re not speaking in innuendo. I’ll totally high-five you when we get out of here.” George raises an eyebrow at him. “Like—an actual high-five.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” George says.

“*Elliot !*” Dream hears a teacher yell, and his eyes flip to one of the cafeteria tables behind George, where Elliot—his pride and joy—is unearthing from underneath the table, wearing the paper sheet that had been originally spread on top of it.

“Oh, fucking fuck,” Dream says, and stands up from his seat, walking over. “*El !*”

He moves in to yank Elliot out from under the table by the arm, but when he pulls him out he manages to unearth Sylvie, who’s giggling at his side and holding a pair of kid scissors. “Can you see? Can you see through the holes?” She calls to Elliot, and he says, “Dad, look, I’m a *ghost* and Sylvie cut me *eyes!*”, proudly standing to show Dream the paper sheet they’ve cut into a ghost costume. Fucking *fuck*.

“Come on, Elliot, this wasn’t part of the Halloween decorations,” Dream says. He can feel eyes on his back, and he pulls the ghost costume off of Elliot’s head. When he pulls it off, his hair is full of glue and glitter. “Oh my *God* .”

He pulls Elliot out of the school by the arm, apologizing profusely to the teachers who send him dirty looks and trying his hardest to keep in his laughter for when they’re outside, at least. By the time they make it to the front entrance, he sits Elliot down on one of the front steps and yanks the ghost costume back off. Elliot beams up at him with his gap-toothed smile.

“Did I scare you?” He asks. “I was being a ghost. Gigi said she wasn’t scared but she was *totally scared* .”



“Come on, Elliot, why would you want to scare your friend?” Dream asks, distraught. He tries to run his fingers through his hair, but his bangs are practically glued against his forehead. It’s going to be a bitch to get out. “This isn’t gonna come out, my man. I think you’re gonna have glue-hair forever.”

Elliot’s eyes widen. “*What ?*”

“He’s right, you know,” George says, and when Dream looks up he’s leading Sylvie to the front steps, sitting her down close to Elliot as he gets his own good look at the damage. She definitely doesn’t have glue in her hair, but she’s taped a few pictures of black cats to her body instead of against the wall. “That happens when you put too much glue in your hair. At some point, it’s gonna dry and you’ll be like that forever.”

Elliot twists around from looking at him to look back at Dream. “Is that true, dad?”

“Simple science,” Dream agrees gravely. Elliot’s mouth hangs open.

“I don’t *want* glue hair,” he says. “I want my normal hair! She’s the one who put glue in my hair! She said it would keep the sheet on.”

“What was the glitter for, then?” Dream asks.

“To make it look cool,” he says. “It was my idea. Does it look cool, dad?”

Dream sighs, looking over at Sylvie. She blinks at him passively. “Since when do you two get in trouble together?” He calls over at her, and George smiles from where he’s sitting next to her, picking tape and paper off of her clothes. She shrugs.

“We both had the same idea, so we were helping each other,” she says.

“I didn’t even throw seashells at her!” Elliot says, as if that’s enough for him to get off scot-free.

“Yeah, and it was *super* funny because Gigi ran away,” Sylvie says. “Did you see, Georgie? Gigi was the one with the curly hair, she thought he was an *actual ghost* —”

“That’s quite mean of you to do, Sylvie,” George says, and brushes her hair out of her face. “What if she was proper scared?”

“Well, she’s not scared anymore,” Elliot says. “Mrs. Luther ruined the prank.”

“She totally ruined the prank,” Sylvie agrees.

“I hate Mrs. Luther,” Elliot continues, as Sylvie nods animatedly. “One time I asked if I could read comics for independent reading time, and she said *no* ! And she said that I had to read a real book.”

“She’s so mean!” Sylvie says excitedly, and stands up to come sit next to Elliot, forcibly pushing Dream’s leg to the side. He laughs, standing up to go walk next to George. He’s watching them all with his head tilted, a smile playing on his mouth.

“I think that’s the first time I’ve heard Sylvie be nice to someone,” George says.

“Elliot’s nice,” Dream says, watching them both rip up one of the papers Sylvie taped to herself and laugh maniacally as it sprinkles to the ground. “I think he finds it easier to bond with people when it’s about something he hates, though.”

“He’s smart, then,” George says. He watches Elliot and Sylvie continue their frenzied, second-grader conversation. “That’s really the basis for all friendships.”

“You’re saying that like it really isn’t,” Dream says, and George laughs again, looking up at him. His eyes take in the light and spit it back out, warming the surface of Dream’s skin.

“I mean, those definitely aren’t the basis of *my* friendships, but to each their own,” George says.

“What are yours based off of, then?” Dream asks.

“People kissing me,” George says. “Apparently.”

Dream doesn't say anything, for a second. If that's a dig at him, it doesn't hurt—it just makes him feel a little queasy. He's definitely not thinking right. They cleared the air—that shouldn't mean that he wants to kiss George *again*. Once should've been enough to satiate him. "I'd hope so. I really do want us to be friends."

"Dream," George says. "We're not gonna be friends."

Dream doesn't say anything, watching Elliot shove at his hair so that he sprinkles glitter all over the steps of the school. He figures George is probably right.

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"I was gonna wear a cowboy hat," Dream says dejectedly when he pulls up to the front of Sapnap's apartment, watching him wave around an imaginary lasso then push himself into the shotgun seat. He'd gone back to the costume he uses for most Halloweens where he has to trick-or-treat with Elliot—a white mask with a smiley face drawn onto it—but it's sitting between his legs at the moment. "I thought I'd switch it up this year. Thanks a lot for ruining my idea."

"Fuck off, it wouldn't have even looked good," Sapnap says. "You're from Florida. Barely counts. Yeehaw! Let's fuckin' go."

They pull up to the front of the bar George had texted him the address to—yet another cramped Brooklyn pub that strictly plays shoegaze music and is full of people who find it socially acceptable to wear their Halloween costumes the night after Halloween. He doesn't know how George finds these places. They make their way inside so that he can find George by the bar.

"Hey!" He says happily, and steps to the side to show off his friends. He's holding a wet pair of plastic vampire teeth in his hand, and there's fake blood smeared around the sides of his lips, and there are two tiny black dots drawn in Sharpie on his neck. Very creative. Dream is still endeared. "You must be Sapnap! I'm George. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, man," Sapnap says. "Sorry we didn't get the zombie dress-code."

"We didn't even coordinate this, is the sad part," one of George's friends pipes up—a tall guy who also has a British accent, wearing blue makeup around his eyes as if to make himself look dead. "I'm Wilbur, pleasure to meet you and all that, but—we didn't even *coordinate* it. We're just all painfully unoriginal."

“Not all of us,” the other guy that’s with them says skeptically. “I’m a—80s glam rock singer, see? I made my hair all poofy.” He shoves it upwards with his painted nails, showing off how his hair sticks up.

They’re lost in a costume-related conversation for a while, but Dream can’t help but gravitate towards George. Of course he can’t help it. He’s never tried to stop himself so far. “So it was your idea to go out, *and* you’re designated driver?” He asks him.

“I’m the backup designated driver, actually,” George says. “Technically, Karl’s the designated driver. But you never know how the night’s gonna end.”

“Looks like it’s gonna end pretty well,” Dream says, looking down at the heavy bunch of laughter Karl and Sapnap are lost in. “Your friends seem nice. You met them when you moved?”

“Actually moved here because I knew Wilbur decided to move to the city years ago,” he says. “And he liked it so much whenever we’d talk about it, and, like, I don’t know... it was always at the back of my mind. But I figured I needed a reason, right?” He sighs, looking down at the bowl of bar peanuts he’s sorting through. “And then, I mean—got one.”

“Right,” Dream says. “Well—I’m glad you’re here. Instead of... anywhere else.”

“Thanks,” George says. “I’m glad I’m here too. Now.”

He thinks about what George had said. *We’re not gonna be friends*. Dream knows, in a messy way, that it’s true—they’re not going to be friends the way people like them are friends, in the way parents that drive their kids to playdates are friends. They shouldn’t be—they *can’t* be. But he doesn’t know what the alternative is. Every other alternative ends with his mouth on George’s mouth. “We should probably get back to your friends.”

“Mm, it’s so nice here, though,” George says. “Quieter. And we have peanuts.”

“You’re not even eating them,” Dream says. George picks one open with his nails and slams it between Dream’s lips, forcing a hand on his jaw to make him chew. And chew again. And chew again. He narrows his eyes at George in annoyance but doesn’t say anything, because he has a peanut in his mouth.

“Yeah, because you’re eating them,” George says, and when Dream swallows he still keeps his hand on his chin. And then he yanks it away. Dream can feel the outline of his hand on his skin like a phantom. “See? We’ll be out of peanuts in no time.”

“You’re the worst,” Dream says. “And you’re bad at cutting up cobwebs.”

George snorts. Dream is a lot closer than he usually prefers to be to people. Their knees are touching from where they’re both sitting on spinning barstools. “They’re just circles with some lines cut out.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Dream says. “You gotta—you gotta mix it up. Some angular lines. Some softer edges. Keep the viewer interested.” He watches George wipe fake blood off of his bottom lip. “Y’know.”

“You know a lot about keeping a viewer interested,” George says. Dream’s brain takes a second to catch up, but by that point George is already speaking again. “Sorry.”

“Sorry?” Dream repeats. “For what?”

“For—” George says, and hesitates. “Sorry. Nothing. I know I should stop bringing it up.”

“The…” Dream says, and then pauses. “The high-five?”

“No, Dream, the kiss,” George says.

“I know you were talking about the kiss,” Dream says. “I was being courteous.”

“Didn’t work,” George says. They look down at where their feet meet against the chairs for a while longer. “Yeah. I just—”

Dream’s phone gives a sudden ring, and he frowns at the caller ID—Niki. The person who’s supposed to be babysitting Elliot tonight. Definitely not a good sign. “One sec,” he tells George,

plugging his ear with one finger and then making his way through the bar, swinging back out onto the main street. “Hello?”

“Hey,” Niki says, from the other end. “Listen—don’t freak out. Nothing bad happened.”

“Dude,” Dream says, heart rate spiking. “Do *not* start a sentence with that. Like—ever.”

“Okay, well, I’m just telling you because nothing happened,” Niki says. “But... Elliot did kind of fall off your kitchen counter and sprain his ankle.”

Dream pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “I’m home in twenty.”

“No, come on, he’s in bed,” Niki says. “You don’t have to ruin your night. He’ll be fine. I just wanted to tell you.”

“It’s fine,” Dream says. “Just—I’ll be back home soon.”

He should’ve guessed Elliot would pull some shit on the one night he decides to leave. He sighs, walking back inside the bar to inform Sapnap of the bad news. George’s friends all give him a very genuine goodbye—he knows it’s genuine because he knows George’s niece has probably sprained her knee falling off a counter at some point—but when he makes it to his car, he finds that George has followed him outside. Not part of the plan.

He shades his eyes from the glare of the bar’s bright lights as George opens his car door, slipping himself into the shotgun seat. “You know I’m not leaving because I’m bored, right? Elliot—”

“Yeah, I heard,” George says. “Sprained his ankle. Would be surprised if it’s the first time he’s sprained his ankle.”

Dream laughs, a little. “It definitely isn’t.”

He can tell George is looking at him from the shotgun seat, and he tries to think about what he’s thinking about—probably regretting putting himself into this situation, really. Realizing that he keeps sitting in Dream’s shotgun seat and hanging around him even though he knows it can’t end

well—even though he knows what Dream has told him already. He tries to focus on the street, but even that is hard.

Dream knows what he said, but what he doesn't know is how true it is. He doesn't know how true *anything* is.

He parks in his complex's garage and then brings George up to his apartment, waiting by the door so Niki can open, looking flustered and red-faced with her hair tied away from her face and her hands covered in finger-paint.

"I'm so sorry, I swear I tried not to let him out of my sight, but he—" she starts, but Dream stops her, laughing a little bit at the state of the apartment. It's the best it's looked so far after someone's babysat Elliot for him.

"Niki," he says. "You're an angel. Really. Don't worry about it. Once Sapnap lost him in the apartment building because he was playing with the elevator buttons."

"I'd almost prefer that," she says, relaxing a little bit, and Dream leaves her and George to talk in the living room as he goes into Elliot's room, flicking on his nightlight. Elliot's curled up under his blankets, with his ankle covered in a bandage as he flips through a comic book.

"What'd you get yourself into this time?" Dream says, making a show of sighing heavily and sitting next to Elliot on the bed, pushing him a little bit as he giggles and slams his comic book shut.

"Nothing," he says. "What about you?"

"What did *I* get myself into?" Dream asks. Elliot nods. "Crap, I dunno, man. I'm still figuring it out. I told you not to cause Niki too much trouble."

"I didn't," Elliot says. "Me and Niki had fun. I was just trying to put my picture up on the fridge and I *fell*."

Dream sighs. "You could have asked her to put it up for you."

“It was faster,” Elliot insists. “Hi, George.”

“Hey, Elliot,” George says warmly, stepping closer into the room from where he’s idling in the doorway, skin lit up green by Elliot’s night-light. He walks closer, ducking down on his knees next to Dream to cock his head at Elliot. “Glue hair and a sprained ankle. What’s your dad gonna do with you?”

“I don’t have glue hair anymore!” Elliot whines, but Dream’s looking at George, and he’s so good with Elliot it’s kind of making him woozy. His friends are good with Elliot, but people he sees aren’t. But he supposes he’s not seeing George. He’s friends with George. He just doesn’t know how much he likes that word anymore.

“I think I still see some,” George says, and makes a show of squinting at Elliot’s hair. “Hmm. I bet if you go to sleep really quickly, it’ll get absorbed into the pillow and you’ll wake up tomorrow with no more glue in your hair. What do you think, Dream?”

“I think he’s right,” Dream says, nodding along. Elliot giggles again, says something like, *nooo, he’s not*, but he closes his eyes and leans his head into the pillow anyway. George follows Dream back out into the living room as he closes the door gently behind him.

“Is he actually going to fall asleep?” George asks.

“Oh, no way,” Dream says. He hears the light flick on again. “He’s gonna read his comics for a few more hours and then pretend he’s not tired tomorrow morning. He always pulls it.”

George laughs. And then they’re alone in front of Elliot’s bedroom, and Dream’s mind is flying away from him. George had wiped the fake blood off of his mouth as if knowing it would freak Elliot out. It’s such a tiny thing that it almost gets bigger in Dream’s mind, makes his stomach twist around in comfortable warmth.

He knows he’s not a good idea. He’s—never sure about himself, always freaks out about the type of person he is, but George is looking at him like that anyway, like he already knows. Rather: like he’s always been able to tell. Rather: like he doesn’t mind.

“I should probably go,” George says, and then Dream says, “No. Wait.”



George blinks. “Um. Okay.”

“I—” Dream says, and even when his voice freezes up he tries to push through, at least a little bit. “I just—I know I’m a fucking mess and I’ve got a kid and *you’ve* got a kid and I’m so nervous about what people think, like, all the time, but—can you—can I high-five you?”

“Can you—” George says, furrowing his eyebrows. “Did you just fucking ask to high-five me?”

“Kiss,” Dream says. “Sorry. Kiss. I’m, like, still kind of thinking about the high-five thing.” He watches George bite his lips into his mouth to keep himself from laughing. “God, fuck it. Wanna make out?”

George laughs. It’s one of those dry laughs, the ones that end on sharp edges, the razor-edged ones that clue Dream in to his relief, like he hadn’t been the only one overthinking all along. And then he leans up and kisses Dream instead of responding.

The internal monologue of reasons why Dream has managed to stop himself from wanting him pauses. It was never wanting to *be* him. He pushes fingers into George’s hair, feels hands melt against his sides, his eyes shut against the rapid movement of George’s mouth, his lips grabbing against Dream’s tongue. It was never anything but wanting him.

And then George pulls away. He still has his eyes closed, his lips parted, slightly, his fingers tight against Dream’s hips. “You’re a good high-fiver,” he mumbles, and then opens his eyes again, biting his lip into his mouth when Dream rolls his eyes.

“You’re so fucking stupid,” he says.

“*Dad !*” Elliot calls from his room. “Can I have popcorn?”

Dream shuts his eyes and groans, leaning his forehead against George’s, feeling the reverberation of his laughter throughout his body.

“Totally, El,” he calls.

“I’ll go make some right now,” George says, still not moving away. “Go read him his comic book or something.”

“Thank you,” Dream says, and means it.

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